

## Second Sunday of Advent December 4, 2011 B

### DEALING WITH GUILT HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY

In today's first reading, we listened to God speak through the prophet Isaiah in the following words:

*"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her **guilt** is expiated."*

With the exception of the psychopath and the most hardened of hearts, all of us feel guilt on a fairly regular basis. If we have a scrupulous conscience, we live in a constant state of guilt. Guilt is that unpleasant feeling we get when we realize that we have done something we believe is wrong or when we fail to do what we know is right.

We can experience guilt about all kinds of things. For example, we may feel guilty about what we *said* or *did* to one or more persons. Even though what we said was true, we may realize, upon reflection, that what we said or did, didn't need to be said or done in that particular situation. Our unwarranted words or actions may have been directed at our family, parish, work or social setting. Our words and actions may have left another person hurt and diminished in a way that was not necessary, and we feel guilty.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *roles*, *duties* and *responsibilities*. As spouses, parents, priests, sisters, single persons, bosses, or employees, we may believe that we are failing in some way. We may feel guilty because we know we are neglecting our duties and responsibilities. We may even feel guilty because we deem that our *best efforts* are not good enough for others or for ourselves. Parents may feel guilty because an adult child is living with a fiancé/e and has stopped going to church. Adult sons and daughters may feel guilty because they think that they are not giving their aging parents enough time and care. Caring for a sick loved one may cause us a lot of guilt if we sometimes wish the loved one would die. Children often carry considerable guilt within a family situation. They may blame themselves for the fights between their parents or for their parents' divorce, or even for the death of a parent.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *relationship with God*. We feel guilty because of our failure to pray, or because we only give God the last few minutes of our day when we are tired, or because our efforts at prayer are very poor. We are constantly thinking of other things when we are praying. As parents, we may judge that we have done a poor job of passing on our Christian beliefs and practices to our children.

Many people experience a lot of guilt in the area of *sexuality*. Our parents, or the Church, may have told us that the worst kind of sins are sexual sins. Hence, we may harbor guilt because of impure thoughts, words and deeds. We may feel guilty when we look at the *poverty* in our world and judge that we are not generous enough when it comes to sharing our material blessings with the poor. We may carry a lot of guilt because of *past failures*, e.g., abortion, adultery, theft, failure to be a good example to our children, etc. Even though we may have confessed past failures, we may still carry guilt. I'm sure each of us could add numerous examples to the above list of reasons that generate guilt in our lives.

When it comes to the topic of guilt, it is very important for us to distinguish between what spiritual counselors and psychologists call *healthy* and *unhealthy* guilt (or *true* and *false* guilt, or *appropriate* and *inappropriate* guilt).

#### HEALTHY GUILT

Because the "guilt thing" was overdone in some homes, schools and churches in the past, some people today *overreact* by trying to free themselves (and their children) from *all* guilt. They want to live "guilt-free" lives. This is a huge mistake.

If we look closely at some of the teachings and actions of Jesus, we notice that he not only tried to free people from their sins and from the guilt around sin (e.g., the Samaritan woman, for her several failed marriages, and Peter for his denial of him), but he also told stories intended to create guilt (and positive action) in people who had become insensitive to wrongdoing in their lives. For example, if we reflect on the parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we see that Jesus is condemning the behavior

of the Rich Man who was insensitive to the poor, condemning the Levite and the priest for ignoring the wounded man on the side of the road, and condemning the self-righteous behavior of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus was saying to his audience and to us that we *should feel guilty* if we behave like the rich man, the Levite, the priest and the elder son.

In his book *Whatever Became of Sin?*, the famous and highly regarded psychiatrist, Karl Meninger, lamented that too many of his peers were trying to free their patients from all guilt by helping them to believe that they were not guilty of any wrongdoing. In contrast, Dr. Meninger discovered that *when he helped his patients to take responsibility for their wrongdoing, they invariably started to get better*. When we try to free ourselves or others from real guilt, we are doing no one a favor. When we do or say wrong things, we need to have the courage and humility to acknowledge our wrongdoing and repent of it. Some examples of when it's healthy to feel guilty:

- Failing to treat others or their property with respect.
- Hurting the good name of others.
- Being unjust and untruthful in our relationships with others.
- Manipulating others for our selfish gain.
- Ignoring poverty in our midst.
- Abusing our body with excessive use of food, alcohol or drugs.
- Using sex not as an expression of committed love but simply as a way to pleasure oneself.
- Being lazy and inattentive to our relationship with God. Missing Mass for no good reason.

If in the past, parents, schools and churches laid too much guilt on people, there is a danger today that the pendulum is swinging too far in the other direction.

We may need to ask ourselves if we are numbing our consciences, rationalizing our actions and refusing to feel *appropriate guilt* for actions that are clearly wrong and hurtful to others, ourselves and our relationship to God.

## UNHEALTHY GUILT

If there is such a thing as good and healthy guilt, there is also such a thing as bad and unhealthy guilt—the kind of guilt that diminishes us as persons. This happens when we feel guilty for things that we need not feel guilty about. Some examples:

- We are doing all we can to care for a loved one who is sick, and yet feeling guilty that we are not doing more; feeling guilty that we are resentful when our lives are totally absorbed in the care for our loved one; feeling guilty for placing a loved one in a nursing facility because caring for the loved one is now endangering our health.
- Blaming ourselves for the wrongdoing of our adult children and thinking: "If only I had raised them differently."
- Feeling guilty about actions that we now believe to be wrong but we didn't believe to be wrong when we did them many years ago, e.g., abortion.
- Feeling guilty about separating from or divorcing an abusive spouse; feeling guilty because we are not the *perfect* mom or dad, son or daughter, spouse or friend.
- Feeling guilty for missing church even though we were sick or traveling and couldn't get to a church without great inconvenience.
- Perhaps the saddest example of inappropriate guilt is the guilt children experience when their parents' divorce or when they are sexually abused.

Inappropriate guilt takes on excessive form when individuals feel guilty for just about everything. We are usually only freed from such excessive guilt through much spiritual counseling, which should free us from the feeling that God is a tyrant (which scrupulous people believe *unconsciously*), and introduce us to a God of love.

## DEALING WITH GUILT—THREE RESPONSES

When dealing with guilt, we can choose one of three possible responses. We can deny guilt by suppressing it. We can go around feeling horrible about past failures, but do nothing to free ourselves of our guilt. Both of these responses are obviously very unhelpful. A third and helpful option is to face our guilt, and check to see if it is appropriate or inappropriate guilt. We may conclude, "Yes, I have indeed violated my conscience." In this case, we can take the necessary action to free ourselves of this guilt. What might be elements of constructive *action* that will help us to release inappropriate guilt from our lives?

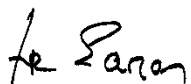
*First, name our wrongdoing and take responsibility for it.* In the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their sin of disobedience. It takes *courage* and *humility* to recognize our wrongdoing.

*Second, confess our wrongdoing.* When doing this, we need to remember that our God is a God of infinite mercy. If God could forgive David for adultery and cold-blooded murder, he can forgive us. If Jesus on the cross could forgive the repentant thief and his executioners, surely he will forgive us our failings. If you have a problem believing in a merciful God, recall the words of Jesus: "I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous people who have no need to repent" (Luke 15:7). An excellent prayer to use for this step is Psalm 51 (David's prayer of contrition for his sins).

Catholics have the practice of confessing wrongdoings to a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many find the exercise of telling another their wrongdoings and *hearing* the words of absolution a very healing experience. In sacramental reconciliation, penitents experience God's mercy in a very tangible way and receive God's grace.

*Third, restitution.* If you need to make amends or restitution to someone, do the best you can. If we can't make *full* restitution of property we stole, we need to return back as much as we can. And if we can't make restitution *directly* to a store or institution, we should at least give a donation to charity. Also, if we have hurt someone by our words or deeds, we should let them know that we are sorry. We can do this verbally or through a letter. God's mercy never excuses us from doing what we can to mitigate the damage caused by our wrongdoing.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.